

NCA
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BUI TUAN

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SPRATLYS IN NEWS AGAIN

ANNCR:

THE PHILIPPINES IS QUIETLY STRENGTHENING ITS POSITION IN THE SPRATLY ISLANDS, A SMALL ARCHIPELAGO IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA...AS WE HEAR IN THIS BACKGROUND REPORT BY VOA'S BUI TUAN.

VOICE:

THE SPRATLYS, WHICH TAKE IN ELEVEN OR SO SMALL, BARREN ISLANDS, ARE LOCATED ALMOST EQUAL DISTANCE FROM THE PHILIPPINES AND VIETNAM AND SOME NINE HUNDRED KILOMETERS FROM HAINAN, THE NEAREST CHINESE TERRITORY. CHINA CLAIMED SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE ISLANDS IN 1956. BUT, AS THINGS STAND, SEVEN ISLANDS NOW FLY THE PHILIPPINE FLAG. THE SEVENTH -- PANATA -- WAS QUIETLY OCCUPIED BY FILIPINO MARINES EARLY THIS MONTH. VIETNAM OCCUPIES THREE ISLANDS, AND TAIWAN ONE.

VIETNAMESE TROOPS OF THE FORMER GOVERNMENT OF NGUYEN VAN THIEU ARRIVED IN THE SPRATLYS IN 1974 AFTER SOUTH VIETNAMESE FORCES WERE DRIVEN FROM THE PARACELS, A GROUP OF ISLANDS TO THE NORTH OF THE SPRATLYS. TAIWAN HAS TROOPS ON LIGAW -- THE LARGEST ISLAND OF THE SPRATLY GROUP.

BOTH VIETNAM AND THE PHILIPPINES ARE REPORTEDLY BOLSTERING THEIR MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE AREA. IN ADDITION, THE PHILIPPINES HAS BUILT A FISHING PORT ON ONE OF ITS ISLANDS AND IS CONSIDERING THE OPENING OF COMMERCIAL AIR SERVICE TO THE SPRATLYS.

THE SPRATLYS ARE STRATEGICALLY SITUATED ON THE MAIN SEA ROUTE BETWEEN THE INDIAN AND PACIFIC OCEANS. BUT MORE IMPORTANT PERHAPS IS THE FACT THAT THE UNDERSEA AREAS ADJOINING THE

ISLANDS ARE BELIEVED TO HOLD IMPORTANT OIL DEPOSITS. TWO YEARS AGO, OIL WAS FOUND IN SMALL QUANTITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES-HELD SECTOR. THE DISCOVERY TOUCHED OFF CLAIMS OF CHINESE SOVEREIGNTY BY BOTH CHINA AND TAIWAN. VIETNAM LATER JOINED IN THE FRAY BY PUBLISHING NEW MAPS WHICH SHOWED ALL THE SPRATLY GROUP AS VIETNAMESE TERRITORY.

INTEREST IN THE WATERS OFF THE SPRATLYS WAS HEIGHTENED EARLIER THIS YEAR WHEN OIL WAS LOCATED OFF THE PALAWAN ISLANDS IN THE PHILIPPINES, NOT FAR FROM THE SPRATLYS. PRESIDENT MARCOS PREDICTS THAT COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION OF PALAWAN OIL COULD PROVIDE AT LEAST TEN PERCENT OF THE PHILIPPINES PETROLEUM REQUIREMENTS.

OBSERVERS SAY THAT SAME RESOLUTION OF THE DISPUTE OVER OWNERSHIP IS NECESSARY BEFORE FULL-SCALE EXPLORATION FOR OIL CAN BE CARRIED OUT IN THE SPRATLYS. A JOINT STATEMENT ENDING THE VISIT OF VIETNAMESE FOREIGN MINISTER NGUYEN DUY TRINH TO MANILA EARLIER THIS YEAR NOTED THAT ANY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VIETNAM AND THE PHILIPPINES WOULD BE APPROACHED IN A SPIRIT OF CONCILIATION. AS FOR CHINA, PEKING RECENTLY SIGNED A NEW OIL CONTRACT WITH THE PHILIPPINES, UNDER WHICH THE PHILIPPINES WILL BUY EIGHT MILLION DOLLARS WORTH OF CRUDE OIL FROM CHINA. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE OCCUPATION OF PANATA ISLAND BY PHILIPPINE MARINES EARLIER THIS MONTH BROUGHT A PROMPT STATEMENT BY THE CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTRY WHICH REAFFIRMED A WARNING PEKING MADE IN 1976 THAT ALL SUCH FOREIGN OCCUPATION IN THE SPRATLYS INFRINGED ON CHINA'S TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY.

JS/RCS